LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

# Why High Performers Really Wake Up Early

***What the research says about routines, control, and the psychology underneath the habit.***

Here is a belief most people in leadership circles accept without much examination: high performers wake up at 5am, exercise, meditate, and guard their routines because they are disciplined, health-conscious, and optimized for peak performance. It is a compelling story, yet it is also incomplete.

Consider Donald Trump. According to multiple biographical accounts, including the 2016 Washington Post biography Trump Revealed by Michael Kranish and Marc Fisher, Trump largely gave up exercise after college because he believed the human body operates like a battery, born with a finite amount of energy that physical exertion only depletes. He has maintained a relentless pace of professional activity for decades. Whatever one thinks of his politics or his health beliefs, the example forces a question that rarely gets asked: if vigorous routine and daily exercise are the engines of high performance, how do we account for people who perform at an extraordinarily high level without them?

The answer, when you pull at it, reveals something more interesting than the conventional narrative. The behaviors we associate with high performers may be real and functionally useful. But the reasons those behaviors exist are more psychologically complex than the LinkedIn highlight reel suggests.

***The routine is not the point. What happens psychologically when it gets disrupted is.***

## First, a Closer Look at the Exercise Claim

The assertion that exercise generates energy for high performers is broadly supported by research, but the mechanism is frequently misrepresented. The cognitive and energetic benefits attributed to exercise are largely downstream effects of consistent training over time, not the acute result of any given workout session.

Acute exercise, particularly at high intensity or long duration, is physiologically depleting. It taxes the cardiovascular system, elevates cortisol, and draws down glycogen stores. The person who

rises at 5am for a hard 60-minute training session before a full day of high-stakes decision-making may actually experience impaired cognitive performance during the hours immediately following that session, depending on their fitness base, sleep quality, and the nature of the demands ahead.

The more defensible version of the claim is this: regular, appropriately dosed physical activity improves baseline capacity and resilience over time. That is a meaningfully different statement. It describes an adaptation that builds across weeks and months, not a same-day performance boost. The distinction is important because the popular narrative collapses the two, creating the impression that any given morning workout is producing the energy and clarity that actually results from years of consistent conditioning.

Trump's belief that exercise depletes energy is not supported by mainstream science. But the underlying observation, that exertion has an acute cost before it delivers a return, is not entirely wrong.

## So Why Do High Performers Really Do It?

Decades of research in performance psychology, behavioral science, and organizational behavior point toward a more nuanced explanation. Two distinct mechanisms appear to be operating simultaneously, and most people conflate them.

**The first is genuine performance optimization.** Exercise, consistent sleep, structured morning routines, and deliberate habits do improve performance over time. This part of the conventional narrative is supported by solid evidence. A 2020 mapping review published in Frontiers in Psychology identified exercise, sleep, and dietary behavior as foundational pillars of sustained human performance across academic, athletic, and professional domains (Laborde et al., 2020). Habits specifically reduce cognitive load by shifting repeated behaviors from the prefrontal cortex, which governs effortful decision-making, to the basal ganglia, where they become largely automatic. This frees up cognitive resources for the complex, high-stakes work that defines senior leadership.

**The second mechanism is psychological control.** This one gets almost no attention in leadership content – and it’s fascinating. Research published by Harvard Business School found consistent evidence that people engaged in high-anxiety or high-uncertainty tasks are significantly more likely to develop structured rituals and routines (Norton & Gino, 2014). This pattern appears cross-culturally and across domains, from professional athletes to performing musicians to business executives. The function of the routine is not only to optimize physical performance, but to restore a sense of agency in an environment where much is unpredictable and outside one's direct control. This distinction is more than academic. It changes how we interpret the behavior.

## Locus of Control: The Explanatory Framework

Julian Rotter introduced the concept of locus of control in the 1950s, and it remains one of the most replicated constructs in personality and organizational psychology. At its core, it describes where a person believes the causes of their outcomes originate.

People with an internal locus of control believe their results are largely the product of their own actions, decisions, and effort. They take ownership of outcomes, look inward when things go wrong, and proactively seek to influence their environment rather than wait for circumstances to change. People with an external locus of control attribute outcomes more heavily to forces outside themselves: luck, timing, other people, the market.

High performers, in study after study, skew strongly internal. Rotter himself characterized internals as exhibiting two essential characteristics: high achievement motivation and low outer-directedness (Rotter, 1966). Research has since linked an internal locus of control to better health outcomes, higher work satisfaction, greater academic achievement, and stronger professional performance (Findley & Cooper, 1983; Spector, 1982).

Here is where it gets interesting. People with a strong internal locus of control are not only more motivated to perform, but they are also more motivated to retain control over the domains of their life where control is possible. When the external environment becomes complex, uncertain, or unpredictable, as it almost always is for leaders of growing organizations, the behaviors that remain entirely within one's own control become psychologically valuable in ways that go beyond their functional benefits.

The early morning workout. The non-negotiable sleep schedule. The daily meditation ritual. These are not only performance tools. For many high performers, they are also expressions of agency in a professional life that offers relatively few of them.

***The routine may be doing two jobs at once: optimizing capacity and managing uncertainty. Knowing which job it is primarily doing is worth understanding.***

## When the Mechanism Matters

If the routine is primarily a performance investment, it will survive disruption reasonably well. A missed workout during a demanding travel week is an inconvenience, not a crisis. The person understands what the habit is for, and they return to it when conditions allow.

If the routine is primarily a control mechanism, disruption tends to produce a disproportionate response. Anxiety that seems out of proportion to the actual disruption. Irritability. A subtle but persistent sense that the day is already compromised before it has really started. These are signals worth paying attention to, not because the routine is problematic, but because the psychological load it is carrying may be higher than the person recognizes.

This is not a critique of structure or discipline. Both are genuinely valuable. It is an observation that the same behavior can be driven by different psychological mechanisms, and that the mechanism has implications for how leaders handle volatility, delegate to others, and manage their own capacity under sustained pressure.

## The Calibration Problem

Locus of control research also surfaces a limitation. An internal locus of control is generally associated with better outcomes but taken to an extreme it can produce its own set of problems. The leader who believes that sufficiently hard work and rigorous routine can solve any problem is also expressing a strong internal locus, and that belief can produce an inability to delegate, a tendency to over-personalize outcomes, and a failure to recognize when external conditions are genuinely determining results in ways that effort cannot overcome.

The more useful concept, both practically and theoretically, is calibration: the capacity to distinguish between what you can actually control, what you can influence but not fully control, and what is genuinely outside your reach. This is harder than it sounds, particularly for high-

achieving leaders whose professional history has often rewarded the belief that persistence and rigor produce results.

Effective calibration requires at least three things. First, a habit of explicitly mapping controllable and uncontrollable factors before responding to a situation rather than after. Second, a genuine audit of attribution patterns over time: when outcomes are good, how much of the credit belongs to skill versus circumstance, and when outcomes are poor, is the analysis equally honest in both directions. Third, access to feedback that challenges your narrative, which becomes increasingly scarce as leaders rise and the people around them develop stronger incentives to confirm rather than confront.

## What This Means for Leaders and Organizations

The practical implications of this research are more useful than the conventional performance habit conversation tends to be, precisely because they require more honesty.

For individual leaders, the key question is not whether to have routines. Routines work. The question is what the routine is doing for you. If it is building genuine capacity, it is an investment. If it has become primarily a way of managing anxiety and restoring a sense of control in an uncertain environment, it is worth knowing that, because coping mechanisms and performance investments call for different kinds of attention.

For organizations, research on locus of control has direct implications for how leadership development is designed. Programs that focus primarily on behavior change without addressing the underlying beliefs about agency and control tend to produce surface-level adjustments that do not hold under pressure. Developing leaders who are genuinely calibrated, who own what they can influence and release what they cannot, is a more durable objective than producing leaders who simply have better morning routines.

And for the founder or executive navigating a growing organization where the environment is genuinely uncertain and the demands are genuinely high, the most useful insight from this body of research may be the simplest one: the habits that feel most non-negotiable are usually doing the most psychological work. That is important to understand before a season of disruption makes it impossible to ignore.

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